

Characters

- Old Man (Juggler)
- Announcer
- Bessie
- Referee
- Charlie
- Fat Man
- Producer
- Stage Manager
- M`C`
- Mr` Love
- The Liberty Belles (Dancers)
- First Partner
- Second Partner
- Executive
- Shorty
- Jack Gee
- Clarence Walker
- Engineer
- Messenger Boy
- Mop-Boy/Narrator
- Lilly
- Policeman
- First Girl
- Second Girl
- Partygoer
- Manager
- Agie
- Cloris
- Town Girl
- Viola

- Ruby
- Porter
- Patron
- Bartender
- Mrs' Van Vechten
- Travis
- Newsboy
- Barker
- Friend #1
- Friend #2
- Richard Morgan
- Kid
- Radio Announcer

Act 1

Act 1, Scene 1

House lights dim. Curtains part on the proscenium stage. In silhouette, a group of people move energetically. More light comes up to reveal a local cabaret dance floor. It's not as it first seemed, it's a battle royal, but only people pantomiming dancing to unheard music. They're just doing their thing.

There is a disturbance at one of the audience entrances. It grows louder.

USHER

You can't come in, in that condition.

OLD MAN

What the hell you mean?

USHER

Like that you can't come in!

OLD MAN

I ain't drunk! Fool! I'm old.

(USHER moves aside and, wheezing with exertion, the OLD MAN wobbles down the aisle and mounts the main stage in the middle of the cabaret audience, takes a chair at a table. The non-music ends, dancers filter down from the stage. Light focuses on the stairs at the back of the theatre)

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight —

(Drum roll)

— tonight is Wednesday and so that means it's Celebrity Night, tonight we are reaching back into yesterday, and the celebrity we are celebrating is BESSIE SMITH!

OLD MAN

Hmm, she was THE celebrity all right.

ANNOUNCER

Tonight we are going to have a Bessie Smith Contest and the winner will sing one of Bessie's own songs, newly and mysteriously discovered in the archives and never done in public before.

OLD MAN

Hmmmmph, ain't no mystery.

(HE sings a few lines of the song)

PLAY IT AS IT LAYS OL' BUDDY
PLAY IT AS IT LAYS MY FRIEND

I just had to wait for my chance.

(Turns to PEOPLE seating themselves at HIS table)

Don't you see . . . I suppose you all don't think you know much about Bessie, Miss Bessie everyone always called her . . . Well, you know more 'n you think you know. Every time you insists you is Beautiful, or don't take no shit, you IS a Bessie Smith.

ANNOUNCER

(Reading rather stiffly from a prepared speech)

Bessie was an inspiration to her people . . .

OLD MAN

There they go with that her people thing, Bessie was an inspiration period! I'm telling you a force of nature.

ANNOUNCER

For 22 years her musical genius . . .

OLD MAN

(Interrupting)

. . . that's right, Amen. 22 years, that's right.

ANNOUNCER

For 22 years her musical genius was a beacon in a storm of oppression . . .

OLD MAN

(Looking around at audience for agreement)

I though he had it for a minute. I thought he knew, didn't you? The numbers don't lie you know.

(Light fades on announcer)

22, 22 years don't you get it . . .

(No one at table answers. Old Man turns to audience)

I keep going to these doggone testimonials expecting somebody to put it all together but they never do. 22, the number of years between when Jack Johnson had the championship . . . Little Arthur, we called him . . . and Joe Louis. You get it now? . . . And 22 years, the length of Bessie's reign! And not just no any 22 years -the SAME 22 years!

(The OLD MAN brings out a deck of strange cards and spreads a line of them on the table, with one graceful pass of his hand)

OLD MAN

After Willard and them got it from Johnson that was when they didn't let no colored man get a chance at it. And we had some good black battlers, San Langford, for example, and Harry Wills. Willard passed it to Dempsey, Dempsey passed it to Tunney and so on. For 22 years they kept the title lilly white, 22 years until ... Well, never did figure it out, how they slipped up ... anyway Joe got a chance. The first Black man after 22 years and Joe won it. You hear ... won it! But we was fooling them all along. That's where she comes in, they had the title but we had the champ. We had Miss Bessie. I was there from the beginning, and it's all right there in the numbers ... if you listen to `em they'll talk to you all right. Of course, some folks don't believe two & two equal four, or conjure women walk by a full moon, but they do. These eyes seen it, I tell you ...

(At the back of the theatre, actors come charging down onto the platform at the left side of the theatre, forming a line. One by one they give their tickets and pass to the foot of the platform. It is a festive, boisterous crowd, mostly men dressed circa early 1900's)

(Voices begin to separate from the general din, but the words are so thick with Australian accents it's only possible to catch a phrase here and there, something about this being the battle of the century, something about the champion being invincible, but something else too about the Negro looking pretty good)

OLD MAN

. . . It started before 1915, you know . . .

(BONG! The CROWD roars, the fight begins. JOHNSON and BURNS go at each other savagely)

OLD MAN

Don't get confused now. When I say number I ain't talking `bout the date, or year. I'm talking about the PURE-DEEE number . . . "Knowledge in the eternal fitness of things becomes the servant of those who serve" . . . The number three is Planets, seven is Spirits. ELEVEN, that's the 'watch out' number, remember THAT ONE. Eleven warns about hidden danger and treachery . . . numbers can tell you all about everything.

(A CHEER goes up from the CROWD as TWO FIGHTERS, one white, one black, come down the aisle, step into the ring that is set up on the left platform)

OLD MAN

. . . It was a day in `08, way over there in Australia . . . Sydney. Some folks . . .

(Glances up as the announcer now turned into the REFEREE steps into the ring)

. . . Figures they were going to just have a nice picnic, seeing a black get done in. Remember what I said about the numbers telling you? Well there was 10 Heavyweight Champions with Johnson at the start and Joe at the end, and so counting Bessie there was Eleven. She makes ELEVEN, get it? What's Number Eleven? It's the watch out sign I done told you, plus of course it being half of Twenty-Two?

(BONG! The bell rings.)

VOICE IN CROWD #1

That uppity bastard is gonna get the licking of his life that he deserves.

VOICE IN CROWD #2

He'll wish he never left Galveston, a darky fighting a champion, whoever heard of such a thing, it's absurd!

(The OLD MAN grunts, gets up from his chair, goes to the foot of the fight platform. HE throws a towel over his shoulder, picks up the taped fighter's water bottle)

(RAT TA TA TA)

(The lights come up. A young BESSIE SMITH and her slightly older brother CHARLIE are doing a tap dance on the right platform on the other side of the stage. The OLD MAN turns his head and nods in her direction with admiration)

OLD MAN

That's Chattanooga Tennessee and there she is

(Jerking his thumb in the direction of the far platform)

still just a kid but as ready as she wanta be.

(BESSIE and her brother do a honky tonk number on the sidewalk in front of a tavern. A crowd begins to grow, Customers come out of the tavern to watch, checker players sitting on cracker boxes look up, passers-by stop)

(The White fighter is bleeding and the Black fighter is moving in)

(For the finale of their little sidewalk number BESSIE and her brother pretend to be boxers and for a few moments the movements on the two platforms are coordinated. BESSIE pretends to whup her brother and he sprawls on the sidewalk and she puts her foot on his chest.

(The Crowd cheers and tosses coins . . . on the other platform JOHNSON has knocked out BURNS)

REFEREE

(Counting very slowly)

8 — come on 9 — come on

(pause)

10!

VOICE FROM CROWD #1

Jesus Christ!!

REFEREE

(raising Jack's hand)

Ladies and gentlemen, Jack Johnson the new Heavyweight Champeen of the world.

(JACK and BESSIE both clap their hands over their heads in the classical victory stance.)

VOICE FROM CROWD #2

The coon did it !!

OLD MAN

(He puts the water bottle down and tosses his towel over his shoulder and moves towards the other platform)

Bessie didn't have no Mother or Father you see . . .

(Bessie's brother playfully snatches the towel from the Old Man's shoulder and drapes it boxer style over Bessie's head. The

Old Man smiles indulgently)

. . . and her sister had a kinda funny way of punishing her . . .

(BESSIE's big sister pushes her way through the crowd. The brother scoots away but BESSIE gets collared. The towel falls to the ground as her sister drags her home . . . BESSIE just manages to grab a crust of bread off the kitchen table as she is dragged through the house and locked in the backyard privy)

OLD MAN

(Shaking his head halfway between a sigh and a chuckle and moving back center stage he glances at the white ex-champ being helped out of the ring)

Well, a lot of folks hadn't expected the heavyweight championship to turn out the way it did. Didn't expect Bessie to turn out the way she did either for that matter.

The years pass rapidly represented by simultaneous action: with BESSIE's fortunes rising beginning on the stage right platform and then spreading to the lower level main stage and culminating on the upper level proscenium and meanwhile JACK JOHNSON's star is slowly descending on the opposite platform. JACK JOHNSON faces a series of fighters all played by the same actor who changes his robe and trunks after each successive defeat.

CHARLIE

(Pleading with a fat man)

You gotta give her a chance.

FAT MAN

(Takes Charlie aside)

Listen man, you wasting your time. She's too big and too black for show business. She ain't got nothing to show nobody wants to see. You know what they say. If you white, you alright. If you yellow, you mellow. If you brown, stick around. If you black, get back.

(JACK JOHNSON knocks the daylights out of the challenger. A white woman joins Jack and they strut off arm in arm)

OLD MAN

Jack didn't make it easy on them. Oh no, rubbed their noses in it . . .

(BESSIE dancing in Ma Rainey's chorus)

(JOHNSON still smiling but noticeably slower slugging with another challenger)

PRODUCER

(to stage manager, pointing to BESSIE)

Who hired her?

STAGE MANAGER

Well, we was short cause Lubelle . . .

PRODUCER

. . . Hell, Fire her! She too big and dark for my show. White men and black men alike they want light skin girls, not no overgrown pickaninies.

STAGE MANAGER

You're fired.

(BESSIE takes the news with a shrug and reaches into the STAGE MANAGER's pocket and grabs the bottle he keeps hidden there and drains it and stomps out, head held high and her frazzled feather wrap trailing over one shoulder)

OLD MAN

Oh that Bessie, the spunk and the spark, it was there from the beginning, they shoulds been trying to nip her in the bud.

(BESSIE pantomime singing. Her star continues to rise, a wooden benched theatre, a tent theater, the roar of the crowd increasing)

OLD MAN

How could they have known . . . humph, most sparks black, white, plaid or whatever other colors you can name just sputter out anyway . . . feeding our faces and wiping our asses seems bout all most of us can manage and even the few sparks that have the force to last, most of them stick with the drummer for this dancing. Sho, sometimes one comes along that don't hang with the herd. Thats a no-no . . . don't even matter if the spark can't help itself, don't even matter if 'later on' turns out they was right and everybody else was wrong, 'later on' is usually too late. Bessie was just a ragtag mommaless pickaninnie. How could they guess how dangerous she'd be. Anyway there was other fish to fry, Jack Johnson was spitting in convention's eye, yessir and the search for the Great White Hope was still on.

(Fans parade around JACK JOHNSON's platform with him on their shoulders)

OLD MAN

Little Artha, that's what they useta call him. Jack hung in there . . .

(lowers his voice)

but they finally got him. Havana, Cuba . . . Like I said Yep, 1915.

(a blinding shaft of light right in JOHNSON's face, he blinks and WILLARD knocks him to the platform, the crowd roars ... the referee steps up and begins counting rapidly and WILLARD's prancing over JOHNSON.)

REFEREE

SEVENEIGHTNINE TEN!

FIGHT CROWD

ROOAAAR!!!

(the din is deafening)

(the roar of the stadium crowd becomes the cheers of the audience as the proscenium curtains part and BESSIE is receiving an encore ovation. The M'C' comes forward with flowers for BESSIE, it's some kind of honorary evening. The referee descends from the ring, aglow with satisfaction, no, more than aglow, jubilant over JOHNSON's defeat. BESSIE takes the flowers from the M'C' shyly . . . and JACK JOHNSON is carried off)

REFEREE

(coming forward)

Things are back the way folks want them to be.

BESSIE CROWD

ROOAAAR!!!

REFEREE

(mistakenly pointing in FIGHT CROWD direction)

All's well that end's well.

VOICE IN CROWD #1

That finishes him alright!

VOICE II

But suppose another darky wins.

(pause)

REFEREE

They can't win what they don't get a chance at.

OLD MAN

That's right. They come up with a solution for that too.

VOICE II

No black contenders from here on in . . .

VOICE I

We'll just keep the title among white men.

OLD MAN

Yep, that's what they decided to do, see right back at the 11 like I told you.

ANNOUNCER

Our own little old home town girl who has her foot way up there on the big time ladder. Didn't your little old Yours Truly, Ha, Ha, know her when. Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen, The Emperess, The Champion, Bessie Smith. And here's a special surprise. Bessie ain't got a mother or father but she sure got a family and I want you to meet 'em.

(The M'C's voice fades out as on by one the family comes up and forms a line facing the audience, VIOLA, TIMMIE, LULU, ANDREW, CHARLIE.)

(The other stages are dark, a soft light comes up on the old man, he is sitting back at his table)

OLD MAN

YESSIRREE that was 1915, too. Them crowds had been growing and growing and the very same year old Johnson lost the Crown, Miss Bessie reached stardom. They had the title back, but we had a Champ . . . Of course, everybody didn't know it back them.

(BESSIE and her brother start horsing around on stage and do their old, dance-boxing routine. The audience eats it up)

AUDIENCE

(Clapping and cheering)

(The REFEREE is perched atop the cannon of a troop ship. It's night and from time to time a flare brightens the sky . . . He does a double take)

REFEREE

What's that?

OLD MAN

. . .everybody was too busy cleaning up the kaiser for democracy to pay any never mind to darkies dreaming.

(A sign proclaims the next act:

THE I GOT IT CAN YOU GET IT GIRL BESSIE SMITH

Bessie's one prop is a simple backdrop decorated with the silhouette of a Magnolia tree and a bright orange moon. Bessie comes off the stage to the last chords of a slow blues and thunderous applause. She is as regal as a queen even though she's only wearing a rather plain street dress)

AUDIENCE

(APPLAUSE)

(The platform stage right is BESSIE's dressing room ... BESSIE's dressing room is an army blanket rigged up under the metal stairs with a bare electric bulb slung over the rail and dangling into the cubbyhole. An elegant young man who has sat transfixed throughout BESSIE's number rushes backstage where the usual bustle and hustle is going on. The doorman points the gentleman to the blanket. There is no place to knock so he clears his throat)

MR. LOVE

Haaaauuuurph.

(NO ANSWER)

(The doorman who has been watching him signals him to just go on in. BESSIE has just finished fixing her stockings and pulling her dress down)

BESSIE

(without surprise or preamble)

You missed it. This here dressing room ain't much but it's supposed to be mine.

(a clatter in the wings and the light aways violently. BESSIE reaches up and steadies it)

BESSIE

You don't belong to me and I ain't lost nothing . . . not that I want back, anyway, so speak up, what's on your mind.

MR. LOVE

I saw you show, Miss Smith.

BESSIE

So?

MR. LOVE

May I call you Bessie?

BESSIE

Go Ahead. So?

MR. LOVE

I'd like to get to know you Bessie.

BESSIE

Since when did a light-skinned man like you have time for some black gal like me. Oh, I get it, you trying to hustle yourself some quick fieldhand poontang huh?

MR. LOVE

I think you're beautiful.

(Suddenly we see through BESSIE's glibness and understand it for what it is — youthful get-along-in-this-rough world . . . Bessie is completely taken aback by such gallant words. Of course wildhorses would never be able to drag such an admission from her. She leans over and surveys her visitor. To her he could be an apparition from heaven, as elegant and poised and good-looking as he is, not like anyone she's every met before in her short life. As much difference as night and day between him and the only upper crust she has ever seen, the two-bit managers and ministers)

BESSIE

(She can't bring herself to say the enchanted word)

You think . . . I'm . . .

MR. LOVE

Beautiful . . . Yes, I do. A Queen of Ancient Africa.

(Introducing himself)

I'm James Love of the Mississippi Loves.

(He holds out his arm, BESSIE takes it and they exit past the amazed stagehands and envious showgirls)

This is a love scene, a scene of first love almost a dream, a lovely dream, a ballet, oh well anyhow at least a dance. It begins with a whirl arm in arm with LOVE holding a steering wheel to represent them speeding through the night.

BESSIE

Where are we going?

MR. LOVE

To my parents.

(BESSIE leans on his shoulder and they twirl gracefully ending in a lovely arc at the parent's home -colored Mississippi aristocracy. All this is done in sweeping dance, finally she is accepted. They stroll, they kiss when they marry. He is wearing a stiff new uniform. Ever after is cut short by the war, or more precisely a German bullet and the dance is over. LOVE is killed at the front, the stage-right platform -as he is digging a new hole for the officer's toilet. He stumbles back against the privy knocking it over and then topples into it. Armistice Day, a puny parade with confetti, a flag is draped over the outhouse and it becomes a coffin. BESSIE and the LOVE family stand around mourning and edging Bessie out of her rightful spot as JAMES is lowered away . . . someone at the end of the parade goes off ringing a bell.)

THE LIBERTY BELLES

This scene is almost a production number, all the stages are used as one set, anyway it would be if the whole thing weren't played in reverse, backs to the audience. We are backstage, actors and stage hands come in and hustle about. The LIBERTY BELLES line up and prance on stage and start their number.

(The LIBERTY BELLES are four to six enormous dancers dressed as can-can girls. Their punch line consists of bending over and turning their behinds to the patrons, showing their bloomers and shaking for all they are worth. The audience howls with laughter. BESSIE rushes down the steps, it's almost her cue. The girls form a pyramid, BESSIE sneaks behind them

and when they fall there she is, stage center)

. . . The ovation shakes the foundations and floats from the theatre to the street, from the floor to the heavens. She turns her back to the audience and we see she is crying. The referee suddenly appears, drawn by the black cheers.

BESSIE turns around and comes back on the stage. The audience falls silent. BESSIE mimics wiping the sweat from her brow, maybe it's only a comic gesture, or maybe it's a strategem to wipe her tears . . . Behind BESSIE (actually between us and BESSIE) frantic activity is going on as stage hands shift props for a new scene ... BESSIE and her LIBERTY BELLES are only there to furnish entertainment between the acts of a play to give the stagehands time to change the set. The star and producer of the play, a highly affected gentleman in a lounging smock named EDDIE HUNTER is impatiently waiting for the set to be readied so he can return to his public. Actually his public seems to be enduring the separation rather well, judging by the gales of laughter that keep washing backstage. Out front BESSIE is telling a joke.)

BESSIE

In church last Sunday when the Preacher asked for confessions one of you snake-hipped slickeys ...

(BESSIE pauses and looks out into the audience)

... Yeh ... Yeh, I think I see him now. Anyway this repentor stands up and starts confessing, a half hour later he's still going strong. Finally, Reverend stops him ... "Son," he says, "Sit down, you ain't confessing, you BRAGGING".

(The audience rocks with laughter . . . the REFEREE cracks up too)

REFEREE

Oh Jesus, it ain't nothing but a coon show . . . She sure can sing, but colored music can't ever amount to anything. I mean there's no danger, nothing for `em to get stuck up about, or forget their place in the scheme of things.

Act 1, Scene 2

(BLACKOUT)

(Lights up ... The new Act is just ending and BESSIE rushes downstairs to make her cue, the LIBERTY BELLES are already bouncing out onto the stage. EDDIE HUNTER is rushing upstairs and they collide on the steps)

BESSIE

Where in the fuck is you going?!

(HUNTER can't get a word in edgewise. BESSIE shoves him down the stairs and stomps past)

BESSIE

You mother-less bastard, get out of the way so I can do my song.

(BESSIE mistakes her cue and jumps the gun ... she stomps out on stage and finds herself in the middle of the LIBERTY BELLES' number, so she starts hoofing with the other girls ... HUNTER, picking himself up ...)

HUNTER

(to STAGE MANAGER)

FIRE HER

(When BESSIE comes off, the STAGE MANAGER beckons her ...)

STAGE MANAGER

Psssst

(He gives her the thumb and hands her her pay. Discretion being the better part of valor and knowing what BESSIE's fists can do, he has reinforced himself with the two burliest members of the crew he can find)

BESSIE

(stoically)

Just let me get my feathers.

(She goes upstairs, gets her boa and comes back)

Now just give me my drop and I'm on my way.

MANAGER

Is you crazy? I can't be giving you your curtains or nothing during the performance.

BESSIE

Give me my drops ...

MANAGER

... and we too busy around here doing the intermission, but you come back after the show and everything will be all packed up for you neat as ...

BESSIE

... When I GO my drops GO. I AIN'T NEVER HEARD OF SUCH SHIT!!!

(Before anyone can stop her she goes over and undoes the rope for her drop, which falls halfway down, crashing right into the middle of one of Mr. HUNTER's big scenes, almost braining him ... The actors scream, the band in the pit ducks, the audience howls, thinking it's part of the show. BESSIE runs on stage. In the wings the rope holding the drop has been caught by a stage hand before it can fall all the way. BESSIE leaps up and grabs the pipe on which the drop is attached and pulls it down, and the unfortunate stagehand is hoisted skyward ... BESSIE rips her drop off the pipe and lets go and the stagehand on the other end crashes with a thud ... The clarinetist in the band mistakenly starts the opening number, the LIBERTY BELLES think it's their cue and come dashing on ... Chaos reigns ... BESSIE balling up her drop as she goes and with feathers flying, stomps off into the night ... the light dims on the stage and comes up on the OLD MAN.

OLD MAN

A lot of folks try to talk about Bessie being ahead of her time. She wasn't no more ahead of her time than a bow is ahead of the boat. Something got to cut the way through the waves ... It's rough going, too. Think about it. That's how come the bow gets the best timber and a coat of steel plates to boot ... and there ain't no waves like ignorant waves ... But Miss Bessie was steel, the finest.

BESSIE

(reading sign at base of right platform)

Black Swan, the only colored record company, others are only passing for colored -W'C Handy & Harry Pace.

(BESSIE mounts the platform and is shown into an office with two Black men, one is sitting behind the desk and one is sitting on it. The one sitting on the desk gets up and paces from time to time)

FIRST PARTNER

(One behind desk)

They been stealing from Black music all along, but now we're coming into our own, and we were in this thing long before Mamie Smith, our first woman of color to record "Crazy Blues" started selling in the hundreds of thousands and every

company started rushing in the race record field. We won't be shoved aside.

SECOND PARTNER

You're a terrific stage artist, Miss Smith, but for records the audience is more refined. We're signing Sweet Mama Stringbean for example, Miss Ethel Waters -now she has got a refined sound, you can't hardly tell her voice from white.

FIRST PARTNER

I love your work, but for records you sound more like a fieldhand than anyone we have ever auditioned.

BESSIE

Wal ain't there more of us plain old everyday fieldhand niggers than you high-falutin' Neegroes?

FIRST PARTNER

Sorry, Miss Smith, your sound is just too low down.

(BESSIE goes down the steps and crosses the stage and mounts the other platform. The OKEH RECORD COMPANY. It's the same script except in place of two black executives there's a lone white sitting across the desk from BESSIE, pontificating)

EXECUTIVE

I was the one to sign Mamie Smith, curious isn't it how many blues singers are named Smith -Mamie, yourself, Clara -and not any of you any kin' Anyway, back to the point, I consider myself as well versed in Race music as any one of color. It probably seems strange to you, being quite a big stage star, that no one has signed you, even colored unknowns are being signed. Well I was puzzled too but since I've heard you audition, to put it bluntly, I understand. Your style is too rough. Tone it down, or rather should I say up . . . I'm telling you this is as an honorary colored man.

BESSIE

(protesting)

I ain't got no style ... I'm me.

EXECUTIVE

Elevate it, for your people's sake.

(BESSIE stands up and stomps down the steps with her battle cry ringing)

BESSIE

I ain't never heard of such shit.

OLD MAN

(clearing his throat)

Like I said, the bow has got to be the toughest part of the ship.

(BESSIE moves upstage and then poses behind a curtain. She emerges with elbow length sleeves and a long evening skirt. There is enthusiastic applause ... The main stage has become a cabaret and she has just finished her set. She bows and goes back behind the curtain. People sitting around tables and standing at the bar are applauding)

AUDIENCE

BRAVO!! MORE!! DO YOUR STUFF, GIRL!!

(At one of the tables two gentlemen are sitting, at the adjoining table are three ladies ... The larger of the two men, JACK

GEE, is tilted back in his chair carrying on a flowery conversation with the women, and lying about the kind of work he is in)

JACK GEE

Well, you see, ladies, I'm a policeman, the best colored policeman in the whole city of Philadelphia.

(His partner taps him on the shoulder)

Excuse me please a moment, ladies.

(turns to his partner)

Man, what you want? ... Now ain't the time ... I'm just getting on the main line with these chicks. They eating it up.

SHORTY

Jack Gee you oughta quit that policeman stuff, you just a plain old night watchman and that ain't no bad job either. You ain't never gonna be no policeman, they keep turning you down 'cause you can't write or read.

JACK GEE

What I mean is if I could read or write, they'd take me so I is practically a policeman, right?

SHORTY

IF!? ... Why, shucks, man, if I ...

JACK GEE

(pointing)

There she is! ...

(BESSIE comes from behind the curtain and begins to mingle with the customers)

JACK GEE

... Ain't she the most magnificent thing in the world.

SHORTY

She sure is some hunk of woman.

JACK GEE

Mr' Horan, the owner, is a big friend of mine and he's going to introduce us, what do you think of that?

MR. HORAN

(walking up with BESSIE)

Jack, meet Miss Bessie Smith.

(Turning to BESSIE)

Bessie, this is one of your biggest fans. This man has worried me to death over you.

BESSIE

Well he sure is a hunk of mountain mule ... Hi ya.

(JACK is speechless)

Whatsmatter, cat got your tongue?

SHORTY

Well, I'll be ... first time I ever seed him in anything approaching that condition.

JACK GEE

(getting it a little together)

Miss Smith, I'm one of your biggest fans.

BESSIE

I can see that.

JACK GEE

Would you give me a date?

BESSIE

I don't get off `til late ... I got another set to do ... But I always could go for some chop suey after the show.

JACK GEE

I'll be sitting right here and a waiting. I know just the place to go.

(JACK snaps his fingers)

Waiter! Champagne.

(he beams at everyone around the table -with a boyish Look-at-me. JACK pours BESSIE a glass, she drains it and prepares to leave)

To chop suey.

BESSIE

(friendly down-to-earth)

Yeh, why not.

(exits)

(BESSIE goes up the steps of the platform which has become her dressing room and searches for the bottle she has hidden somewhere)

SHORTY

You done it ... even if the cat did have your tongue.

JACK GEE

Well it's `cause she's what they call majestic ... she don't even know she is, but I do. Love `em, leave `em, stand `em on their heads, they all the same, you know me, but only a fool won't admit the difference. I'm lucky `cause a man is lucky when he know he met a queen ... his queen. Majestic means when you is in the same room with the thing from which dreams is made of.

(While they talk, at the back of the cabaret, near the entrance, a quiet holdup is taking place. A man has come in and has a

gun in HORAN's ribs. One of the three ladies JACK GEE had been talking to suddenly realizes what is going on)

LADY

(Screaming)

OFFICER!

(Turning to JACK GEE)

(The bandit whirls around just as JACK looks up, and thinking that JACK is a real cop ... Bam! ... shoots him. JACK is knocked out of his chair. Everyone freezes, the bandit backs toward the door ... there is a scraping noise on the floor and slowly JACK GEE pulls himself up. Enraged and half insane, he moves toward the gunman. The punk fires another shot, but he is shaking so that it misses. The crook turns and dashes out of the cabaret, with JACK GEE stumbling after him ... The bandit is so unnerved he turns left into the dead end alley instead of right, into the street. JACK corners him right below the platform that's Bessie's dressing room and splatters him over the head with the top of a garbage can, simultaneously. BESSIE oblivious to the action in the street is taking a few nips)

(JACK goes back to the cafe, people start to toast him, he collapses)

(BLACKOUT)

Act 1, Scene 3

(The light rises on the REFEREE.)

REFEREE

All that struggling and farting and bleating doesn't sway fate one iota It's not the tail that wags the dog Sometimes a little tap to the right to the left, to keep the wheel on the straight and narrow Somtimes a stubborn case, sometimes a close call

(bows)

to arbitrate But the book of destiny has been finished since the beginning and it's infallible. Everyone likes to blame the referee But I just interpret the rules In reality the boundless ocean within which mankind imagines itself to be swimming free Is nothing but Fate's goldfish bowl. The book is written and it's infallible.

(Upstage center, BESSIE is on her knees, her arms spreadeagled on a hospital bed where a bandaged JACK GEE lies supine under a sheet)

BESSIE

Oh Jack Gee.

JACK GEE

(awakening and sitting up)

You crying honey, that ain't your way . . .

(kidding)

Is my getting well depressing you?

BESSIE

(brightening)

I brought you some collard greens.

JACK GEE

How many times you been here anyway? Remember you still got a chop suey date with me.

BESSIE

Every day for the whole two weeks . . . never thought I'd meet a black man not scared of shit.

JACK GEE

You love me?

BESSIE

Is moonshine liquor? Is fat meat greasy?

(BESSIE lays her head on the bed and falls silent again. Beat)

My buddy Carson who sells music and shines shoes stopped me again.

JACK GEE

The one that played that new record for you the other day?

BESSIE

Yeh, it was pretty good too.

JACK GEE

Mebbe but I agree with him when he said he bet you'd do better and I ain't even heard it.

BESSIE

(chuckling)

How you know I could do better than . . .

JACK GEE

I know it and you know it too. Ain't nobody like you.

BESSIE

Ha, well the problem ain't that they ain't like me -Ha, you sure got that bass ackwards the problem is I ain't like them.

JACK GEE

What's the matter, sugar?

BESSIE

Carson had this fellow Clarence Walker from New York with him and he said he could get me an audition and everything up there.

JACK GEE

That's terrific! I got kin up there, Momma as a matter of fact.

BESSIE

He said he'd pay the carfare and everything.

JACK GEE

Folks everywhere oughta get the chance to hear you . . . What's it gonna be?

BESSIE

I ain't even sure it's worth the bother, I'm doing O`K` I ain't never been to New York before . . . love to see that old apple I swear. Jack honey -I don't know which way -I got this funny thirst in my soul -which way to turn. Besides I ain't got a proper dress to wear.

JACK GEE

Why don't you go out and buy one?

BESSIE

I ain't got the money.

JACK GEE

I thought you would be doing pretty good at Horan's.

BESSIE

Well, I got my family.

JACK GEE

You mean you taking care of all them niggers?

(BESSIE nods and tries to shrug it off)

BESSIE

I ain't never been no good with money, besides, my big sister been my momma. I ain't never gonna abandon my family.

JACK GEE

(bragging)

Money's my specialty.

BESSIE

(nods)

Sure.

JACK GEE

Well it could be if I had some, is what I mean . . .

(he pats her hand)

You the best cook in the world, you could open a restaurant.

BESSIE

You sure are sweet to me, Jack Gee.

(She gives him a grateful hug, kisses him goodbye and moves downstage talking to herself. Simultaneous . . . upstage in the half-flight painfully JACK GEE rises from his bed and dresses . . . he goes to warehouse locker and takes out his pride and joy, his watchman's uniform . . . he pawns his watch and uniform)

BESSIE

I ain't doing bad for Black
I ain't doing bad for woman
I'm doing good, even for white!
The Empress of the blues ain't that right.
Maybe I better go get baptized again.
Humph, even drinking the whole River Jordan won't do the trick.
What kind of thirst is this,
inside me, Goddammit!
Like some blind falling down drunk gin mill binge.
Sometimes I believe I done squashed it to hell
But then, Naw, it's back yapping at me.
What's it want.
What kind of straps is these here choking and tangling.
Must be caught in some kinda crazy runaway mule's reins
Why picking on this poor motherless bitch
Tugging, pulling and pushing
And which way anyway
I ain't begging off no battle!
But why don't it come out and fuck or fight
Or lead the way or let me be.

(BESSIE mounts the platform stage left to her dressing room, searches for her trusty bottle, takes a sip and begins to get ready. JACK GEE painfully mounts the steps to her dressing room)

BESSIE

(looking up)

Jack, what you doing here.

(JACK exhausted, holds up a big box tied with a big ribbon. BESSIE takes the box and starts to set it aside)

JACK GEE

No, open it, it's for you Pumpkin.

BESSIE

(puzzled)

For me? Where from?

(She opens the box. It's a stunning new dress)

JACK GEE

Naw, Sugar, where to?

BESSIE

To?

JACK GEE

Yeah New York!

(BESSIE is overcome)

Probably the best way to capture the flavor and pace of the next episode of BESSIE's rise and tribulations would be to imagine a melody with big fat production-number choruses and modest slower paced verses. The extras in the cast have a

special fluidity with not only dual characters being played, but sometimes an actor will even become a prop. Whatever is possible to enhance the understanding, essence and evolution of the plot. First a chorus.

(BESSIE and JACK GEE come down the steps ... people circulating, hustling and bustling, big city style)

JACK GEE

(extracting an elderly lady from the movement)

This here is my Momma ... Momma, this here is Bessie ...

(pointing to pretty saucy young lady)

... And this here is my niece Lilly.

BESSIE

Pleased to meet youall.

(JACK pulls BESSIE into the whirl)

JACK GEE

(playing big-time tour guide)

And this here is where they gonna put the wourld's tallest building.

(The CASTS hip uptown movements become more staid for midtown. CLARENCE WALKER emerges from the passers-by)

BESSIE

(to JACK GEE)

This here is Clarence Walker, my benefacting friend.

(CLARENCE shakes JACK GEE's hand then deftly gets rid of him at the door of the recording company. He leads BESSIE down the corridor. (A double line formed by the cast) She looks back at JACK GEE but CLARENCE has her in tow)

A Verse.

The pace has slowed down almost to slow motion by the time they reach the studio door.

CLARENCE

(Introducing a white gentleman)

Frank Runner, my ... er ... er ... friend.

(BESSIE's eyes buck a bit as she sees the wall with the blanket and the weird funnel sticking out of it like an alligator's snout or a lion's mouth)

ENGINEER

Step up closer, Sister. Just let go.

(BESSIE steps up, gulps and then bellows a long note into the primitive mike.)

(CLARENCE WALKER and FRANK RUNNER exchange approving glances and nod to one another. When the note is finished CLARENCE and FRANK shake hands.)

CLARENCE whisks BESSIE into a cab and the pace picks up again.

Chorus:

CLARENCE

Great going, Bessie you are magnificent. We'll be partners on your records. I'm gonna cut you in my dear, just sign here.

(The double line of the cast has turned into milling pedestrians then slowing into something resembling a cakewalk, with CLARENCE and BESSIE at the head. More and more join the entourage. BESSIE begins to get into the swing of things. FRANK RUNNER moves to her other side. The note BESSIE sang in the studio begins to be played back continuously)

(The parade makes a stop at a radio station. The cast moves into various broadcasting posts: audience, engineers, M'C` BESSIE mouths the words to the playback for a moment and then the parade resumes. Someone has been selling records from the stage right platform and everyone buys one before they join the line. The column has massed upstage and is moving downstage with BESSIE in the lead. CLARENCE and FRANK have disappeared.)

(A MESSENGER BOY runs up and hands her a telegram. She reads it)

BESSIE

(reading telegram)

Yessir, Praise Him from whom all blessings ... My record is the biggest hit they done ever seen. They want me to do another session. Take this money and send for Jack Gee. They say my singing taught the whole world a lesson. Tell my pumpkin to come to New York and meet me.

(BESSIE disengages herself and goes to meet JACK GEE with a big package in her arms. JACK arrives preferable in a puff of steam ... BESSIE and JACK, with the entourage falling in behind, go to the recording studio. Her entrance is a triumph. CLARENCE WALKER and FRANK RUNNER beam)

BESSIE

(singing a fast one)

(She leaves the studio still singing the tune)

CROWD

Miss Bessie! Miss Bessie!

JACK GEE

(amused and pleased)

Miss Bessie?

BESSIE

That's what they say.

(THEY take a table in a speakeasy)

JACK GEE

Seeing you sure is a tonic for chasing the blues.

BESSIE

(to waiter, holding up bottle with label)

Ain't you got no homegrown booze?

The tempo winds down as BESSIE and JACK stagger over to bed exhausted. They plop into the sack and cuddle and we are

at:

Another verse.

BESSIE

Jack Gee.

JACK GEE

Yeh, Sweetie.

BESSIE

You could quit work if you want to and come be with me.

JACK GEE

I appreciate that, but I don't think it would be right.

BESSIE

How come?

JACK GEE

You always need something to fall back on when things get tight. We got to get along when thing go slow you know, one of us gotta be jobbing.

BESSIE

I got bookings a plenty and I get 125 dollars for every phonograph tune I sing that they take.

JACK GEE

(impressed)

Boy, that's some money.

(figuring)

You done two before that's two-fifty, you just done four more, that's two, two-fiftys, that's five hundred, five hundred plus two-fifty, that's 750 dollars, that's something!

BESSIE

Yeah Sugar, even half.

JACK GEE

Half?

BESSIE

Half for Clarence, half for me. He gets half whatever I make on a record. I signed this here paper, we're partners -well almost -anyway, I don't get none of his money.

JACK GEE

Half? The hell you say!

(JACK bolts out of bed. BESSIE is right behind him. They charge up the steps of the left platform which has become

CLARENCE WALKER's office and kick the door down. CLARENCE takes one look at JACK and BESSIE and dives under the desk)

JACK GEE

(kicking desk)

Nigger come out of there and give us that paper before I take some of that partnership outta your ass!

(JACK and BESSIE each take a side of the desk and with one mighty heave, lift it ... CLARENCE looks up and starts to rise, with a sheepish grin. JACK GEE grabs him in the collar with one hand. The light goes off on the platform. A spot comes on, stage center ... FRANK RUNNER is standing there alone, the switch has been instantaneous as soon as JACK grabs CLARENCE in the collar. FRANK begins to speak. He is nervous at first and taps a folded sheaf of paper he has in one hand in to the palm of the other)

FRANK

Ahem ... I'm as innocent as any newborn babe has ever been. Since when did to know a distant associate makes one a real partner in crime. I had no idea -for shame -Why that's no way to treat a client. Of course you realize I'm not to blame.

(The spot widens. BESSIE and JACK are standing there. FRANK throws an arm around each one's shoulder)

Am I so evil, could I be party to such a thing -look at me.

(THEY look at him)

No, no, not with those eyes, those eyes, they can betray, those eyes are only the lackey of logic, slaves to the mechanics of the mind. Look at me through the eyes of your heart that compassionate and infallible compass through troubled times.

(To JACK)

Trust me, sir, begging the ladies pardon, but look at me man to man with the pride of the eyes between your legs.

(To BESSIE)

And you Madam, how do you reach for a note with your head? No! with your lungs, with your throat. Look at me then through the eyes of your talent! A magnificent talent that I stand ready to aid anyway I can!

(he takes his hand from around JACK's shoulder)

Humph, I'm sorry about Mr' Walker's moral failure, naturally I can't make good his shortcomings of the past, that's not good business procedure, but here is a new contract . . . better than before and it's all yours.

(holds out contract to JACK)

Just between you and me, Bessie, I bet that scalawag even tried to screw you out of your royalties.

JACK GEE

What's that?

CLARENCE

What's what?

JACK GEE

Realties what is a real-tease?

CLARENCE

Oh, no you misunderstood what I said.

(he snatches the contract back)

Here ... er ... let ... me check on some spelling ... golly ... yep, got it wrong, royalties due, just a second here. I said I bet be tried to screw you ... you know give you the royal treatment. Here, that's got it!

(FRANK RUNNER scratches out something in the contract and hands it back to JACK. A man mopping floors has come up quietly and been watching the whole scene. He peeks over FRANK RUNNER's shoulder and nods and moves downstage, mopping. The spotlight follows him ... it's the OLD MAN)

OLD MAN

Yep, that got it, oh yeh, Frank fixed that, he scratched Royalties due right out of her contract. Through her whole career Bessie never collected one red cent of no singing Royalties, oh yeh, if I'm lying, I'm flying. With friends like that, who needs enemies ... but need 'em or not, enemies would be coming. A lot of things was going on them days, America was a three ring circus, but Bessie made 'em pay attention, she had the center ring, yes she did.

(A bootlegger's car (3/4 size cardboard cutout) comes ripping across the stage followed by a cop car. They are having a gun battle.)

OLD MAN

Nobody hadn't even seen no record sales like she had. Down South she even gave all-white-midnight-double-the-price performances.

MESSENGER BOY

(entering from stage left)

Telegram for Miss Smith.

(JACK GEE saunters from behind the platform stage left. JACK is the picture of elegance in a pearl gray outfit with matching spats and hat)

JACK GEE

(voice taken on airs to match the suit)

I'll take it boy.

MESSENGER BOY

Who you?

JACK GEE

I'm her manager.

MESSENGER BOY

Sheeyucks, you ain't no manager. I seen you hanging around but you ain't ...

MOP-BOY/NARRATOR

(pulling messenger aside)

Shhhhl Let him be, if he wants to play big shot it ain't no skin off your back.

MESSENGER BOY

Ain't he the one Miss Bessie always bragging about that bought that dress?

MOP-BOY/NARRATOR

Yeah, that's him.

MESSENGER BOY

But ain't her brother Charlie the manager?

MOP-BOY/NARRATOR

So what, the customer is always right. And generous, get me ...

MESSENGER BOY

Here you are, Mister Manager.

(JACK GEE lays a big tip on the MESSENGER)

JACK GEE

Thank you son.

MESSENGER BOY

I see what you mean.

(The MESSENGER winks at the OLD MAN, the OLD MAN winks back and steps forth. He puts the broom down and picks up a roll of tickets. There is a drum roll under his words)

OLD MAN

Like the song said Bessie had the world in a jug stopper in her hand. Of course that didn't set too well with them.

(A round of applause, a line of white folks queueing up.)

OLD MAN

Her catching--how that go--her catching the imagination of the rabble.

(M'C' steps to the center of the stage and tries to get attention.)

REFEREE

The good of the masses doesn't mean the mass knows what's good for them. Why I re . . .

ANNOUNCER

. . . Ladies and gentlemen . . . Ladies and gentlemen . . .

REFEREE

(Breaking back in)

She could be a lot of trouble. She could end up being as big a pain as Joe Hill or Garvey.

ANNOUNCER

(Still trying to gain control)

Ladies and gentlemen, that famous recording artist, ladies and gentlemen.

OLD MAN

Folks loved her records, folks fought to see her. Then them rascals started scrambling to defeat her. They'd misjudged Bessie

before but they didn't intend to make the same mistake again. Oh yes -the fat was in the pan. But Bessie wasn't no pushover, the members could've told `em that.

BESSIE enters grandly with her entourage parading around. Offers of work pour in, a guy holding a telephone keeps shouting cities. Someone else keeps running around with telegrams, clamoring, clamoring. Bessie and her pianist talking and/or rehearsing. BESSIE sending money to her family. A Pullman Porter gapes, and he and the shoeshine boy wave and cheer.

VOICES

Detroit! -\$350 -\$500 --Birmingham! Miss Bessie! -Rode my car, friendly as you please! -\$1,000 -\$1,500 -Memphis! Nashville!

OLD MAN

They watched for that weak spot, that guard to drop, that opening.

VOICES

Atlantic City! Philly! Miss Bessie, Miss Bessie!

OLD MAN

The stage was Bessie's ring, her gloves the band, her robe was her people and her music . . . Yes, Lord, she was woman, she was man, she was the whole Black race -Bad as she had to be -THE CHAMPEEN!

(BESSIE passes the same BLACK MANAGER who threw her out years before . . . he tries to shrink back in the shadows.)

BESSIE

Get your ass out from under that hat and let bygones be bygones.

(BESSIE hands him five bucks to cement the situation and steps up to sing.)

ANNOUNCER

Ladies and gentlemen, the heavyweight champion of the blues!

(The clamor ceases.

The REFEREE is livid with rage.)

(BONG!!!)

(The REFEREE scoots across the stage with a portable prize fight bell in the crook of his arm.)

(BLACKOUT)

REFEREE

Champion, hunh.

(Lights up . . . Everyone has disappeared except BESSIE and the REFEREE. He strikes the bell then suspends it in midair where henceforth it operates magically.)

(BONG)

(The REFEREE has half of a portable boxing ring that he keeps scurrying around trying to pen BESSIE in with. BESSIE is not aware of his machinations. Usually he misses her but whenever he gets her you can tell because she staggers from blows.)

(BESSIE seems to be ready to sing. He catches her. She staggers backwards and sprawls on the stage, but the stage becoms

a bathroom. She gets to one knee)

BESSIE

Oh, you motherless bastard.

(She loses her balance again . . . Now there is a glass in her hand. BESSIE struggles back up. The OLD MAN appears with a towel over his shoulder, a pail and a stool. The REFEREE keeps shuffling the ring so the OLD MAN can't get the stool and things to BESSIE to come to her aid.)

OLD MAN

They wanted to get Miss Bessie in the worst way. But the battle was just starting ... They tousled that first round all over the nation encircling her ... looking for an opening.

(JACK GEE gets her under one arm and steers her to FRANK RUNNER at the recording studio)

JACK GEE

Come on, Bessie.

BESSIE

I'm coming, I'm coming, don't worry about me.

(BESSIE smiles at the saxophonist and steps up to the microphone)

OLD MAN

Folks watched and gossiped but they didn't really know what was going on.

FRANK

(handing her back)

Here she is, Jack.

(They handled BESSIE as if she were so much potatoes or something)

JACK GEE

Put that bottle down.

BESSIE

I ain't never missed no performance yet.

(CHARLIE flings his arms wide)

Chicago!

(A huge hiss and puff of steam)

(BLACK OUT)

(The lights come up on the musicians then on BESSIE and some friends whooping it up at a table in a cabaret. An old friend walks up to her table)

FRANK MORGAN

Bessie, I sell it but you don't have to keep me in business by yourself.

(BESSIE whirls around and bursts into a grin)

BESSIE

Frank Morgan, you old dog!

RICHARD MORGAN

(concerned)

You look tired.

BESSIE

It's a long way from Alabama. I hear you the big bootleg man in town ... I guess you don't need my help.

RICHARD MORGAN

Yeh this is my place now. You ain't doing so bad yourself. But you oughta take a rest. I hear your husband and your record manager is trying to work you to death ... This is my nephew, Lionel Hampton.

BESSIE

Pleased to meet you, son. They trying to make hay while the sun shines, I guess.

RICHARD MORGAN

You gonna be around for a long time, now you hush.

BESSIE

He's heavy into hugging money these days ... not me.

RICHARD MORGAN

You don't need money, Miss Bessie, around here. You know I'd give it to you free.

BESSIE

I'd give it to you free, too.

RICHARD MORGAN

Again?

(smiling)

BESSIE

Again.

(she smiles back at him)

(BESSIE grabs a partner and begins to Charleston. In the mean-time (if possible) three or so old acts from black vaudeville-cabaret days should be going on: A black face comedy act, some one playing the spoons and a juggler. And everyone fades away but the juggler who climbs up to a platform and BESSIE all alone stage center Charlestoning)

OLD MAN (JUGGLER)

The most saintly folks ever walked this earth had a lot of devilment in 'em, and Bessie and her crew, including Jack too, were a long way from being saintly. Of course that gave them evil forces after her, always around accentuating the negative anyway, plenty of ammunition.

YOUNG MAN

Miss Bessie.

BESSIE

Comin' son.

YOUNG MAN

I hope my dancing is all right, I'm not sure yet.

BESSIE

Come here to mamma, I'm going . . .

YOUNG MAN

But what . . .

BESSIE

What my butt, get in the bed and shut up. If you ain't living . . .

OLD MAN

. . . Life ain't worth living. That's what she always used to say, I don't guess she would have slowed down for no evil forces even if she had known. The numbers wouldn't let her anyhow. Her personal number, add up her name yourself if you don't believe me, was a FOUR. Everybody knows that FOUR's are hardheaded people.

YOUNG WOMAN

Miss Bessie, I been waiting like they told me.

BESSIE

Hey there, Momma just stepped out to get some air.

YOUNG WOMAN

You wanta see me?

BESSIE

That's exactly what I wanta do. Take off all that finery.

(BONG!!!)

(The REFEREE appears with his portable boxing ring and a big man in tow. The big man is wearing a boxer's robe and gloves and keeps his back to the audience.)

(BONG!!!)

(The REFEREE snatches off the robe. It is JACK GEE. He attacks BESSIE viciously. He is invisible to her. She reels and staggers from each blow. She slumps to the floor. The REFEREE snatches off the gloves and JACK GEE becomes visible.)

BESSIE

Jack Gee, how you doing honey bun.

JACK GEE

You bulldike, you loud-mouthed drunk, you . . .

(JACK and BESSIE begin to brawl)

(WHISTIE III)

(POLICE run in, mill around, then melt away)

(JACK and BESSIE are in jail. They sit on stools in adjoining cells)

BESSIE

Honey bun?

JACK GEE

Yeh.

BESSIE

You there?

JACK GEE

Yeh ... Yeh Sugar I'm here.

BESSIE

How come you done started fighting me. You turning mean Jack Gee. Don't you remember how it used to be ...

JACK GEE

I know honey, I know. I dunno why. I dunno, it don't even seem like my hand clobbering you.

BESSIE

Ain't you got a good car?

JACK GEE

Yeh.

BESSIE

Don't I keep you in the best suits and ain't things going good?

JACK GEE

Sure Sugar, but that's when they started going bad it seems.

BESSIE

Hunh ... what you saying, I can't figure it.

JACK GEE

Don't matter -Shit -I can't figure it either ... You know, sometimes I might have me a little fling, but you the only one, the only one I love.

BESSIE

(chuckles)

I don't love no one but you, but if I catch you having a fling, your ass is gonna get flung.

JACK GEE

(chuckles)

If I catch you flinging, you gonna get flung too, sweetheart.

BESSIE

Yeh.

(They manage to reach out and touch fingertips through the bars. LILLY enters)

LILLY

I managed to collect up enough money to go one bail. First thing tomorrow I'll get the rest, but some nigger's spending the night in jail.

JACK GEE

I'd stay but, I got to be up in Ohio. I got a big deal working. In fact I might be calling on you for some what they call capital backing. Honey, I'm gonna be what they call a man of affairs.

(A COP enters)

BESSIE

You go ahead honey ... Bye.

(While the COP sets JACK GEE free LILLY slips BESSIE a bottle from under her coat)

LILLY

A little something for the evening air.

(They start to file out)

BESSIE

(calling)

Lilly ... Hey Lilly.

(LILLY turns)

Would you mind bidding a few minutes with me?

LILLY

Sure what is it, Honey?

BESSIE

Nothing ... Nothing. You know what I wish? Don't you love garden growing ... I know what's yapping at me. Living ain't all show biz ... I wish I had a baby.

LILLY

Oh, Bessie be serious

(brightly)

Hey say girl, don't we play Chattanooga again next week? That's always a good time. Hometown Hero. Chattanooga, watch out here come Miss Bessie!

(The POLICEMAN starts to shove LILLY away from BESSIE'S cell)

BESSIE

... Thanks, Lilly you done cheered me.

POLICEMAN

(Pushing LILLY down the hall)

Let's go. Let's go.

BESSIE

Officer couldn't she ...

POLICEMAN

(Retracing his steps)

Shut up Bitch ... I better not here another word out of you.

(Banging on bars)

You're lucky if I don't give you a taste of this shellacker you, Big ape.

(The POLICEMAN exits. BESSIE takes a swig from the bottle)

BESSIE

Big Bessie, Big Black Bessie ... thats me
Me and my big black golden throat
There's something here I don't rightly understand though
Does all this serve some never you mind?
You all can just kiss this black behind
All that glitters ain't gold
Gold humph, yeh so is pee
I'll stand my ground ... this is ground ain't it?
What can it be? How come I feel like I'm drowning?
Why do I feel all these books ripping the skin from me?
Am I bleeding? Do I see sharks
Circling grinning, circling grinning?
How come when some folks love me so, some folks hate me no
Come on, I ready
Why they so scared of me
Whatta I gotta do
Bleach and boil clothes for rich folks in the backyard
Ti'l the vapors and lye done sucked
All the good fine juice outta me
Ti'l I'm just some frightened ole Mammy
Shuffling off to Church hoping I can get Jesus to marry me
Yeh: Come on:
I see you getting closer. Yeh, grinning
Circle all you wanta mister shark
I'm ready ... Big black Bessie's ready
Come on ... Come on; Try me:

END OF ACT ONE

Act 2

Act 2, Scene 1

Over an offstage microphone the voice of Bessie is heard singing the last chorus of a rowdy blues. The last drawn-out note is drowned by a crescendo of wild applause, whistles, screams, and cries of "Bessie!" "Lawd, Miss Bessie!" "More, More!", etc` Bessie is discovered on the proscenium, she backs through the curtain, facing upstage. The band members embrace her and each other, she's trying to get offstage before the mob of well-wishers, fans, relatives, and would-be old buddies descend on her, but she is unsuccessful.

(Held by the embrace of the THEATRE MANAGER, with a bouquet of roses she is trapped by the MOB. Frantic hand-shakes, showbusiness embraces, offerings of drinks, etc` BESSIE grins ... finally excuses and escapes ... BESSIE runs to another area, she snatches her coat and rearranging her make-up as she goes, leads a procession of her CHORUS GIRLS down stage to a house-party.)

(Record music mixed with a live harmonica, laughing mouths, popping fingers, friendly shovings, gin in large galvanized tin tub. The party is leaping. BESSIE and her GIRLS make a grand entrance. BESSIE sits at the kitchen table a little apart from the herd helping herself to heaping plates of pigs feet and potato salad, using a serving spoon and her fingers.)

BESSIE

The funk is flying! Ha, ha, ha, great goo-ga-mooga long live Chatanooga!

FIRST GIRL

Ain't it?

SECOND GIRL

Who's that big old boy playing that piano?

BESSIE

Forget it. Just listen, Babe. The fingers is good, but the rest of him got consumption of the spine.

SECOND GIRL

Consumption of the spine? Big as he is?

FIRST GIRL

That's clap, dumbbell!

SECOND GIRL

You got no call to call me no dumbbell!

BESSIE

(looking over)

Both of yawl hush. And eat! Lord, I could eat this pig alive, starved as I am.

(to FIRST GIRL)

She's right, though. You can't stay dumb and live.

(Calls to front room)

GIN!

(Host brings her water glass of gin, SHE smiles thank you, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and drains half the

glass)

AAAHHH, my favorite pig foot chaser!

(A gentleman, party-goer, snapping fingers and humming along with the music grins at SECOND GIRL)

PARTYGOER

Sweet meat, let's show them people what dancing is.

SECOND GIRL

No, thank you. I went to school.

PARTYGOER

(nodding toward FIRST GIRL)

How about your friend?

(FIRST GIRL pointedly ignores him)

(To SECOND GIRL)

O`K`, it's you and me ...

(Starts to pull her to her feet, SHE protests)

Come on sweet meat, I ain't gonna hurt you.

BESSIE

(quietly)

Leave her the fuck alone. She's one of my girls.

PARTYGOER

(To SECOND GIRL)

Who's the grizzly bear?

(BESSIE stands up and taps the partygoer on the back; he turns around and she drops him with one punch in the face. She sits back at the table and the party goes on. BESSIE dances with one of her girls. Finally like a mother hen she gathers them up and they leave the party. The REFEREE and the partygoer who got punched are on the lookout.

The REFEREE taps the partygoer on the shoulder. The partygoer steps from the shadows, a knife flashes, the GIRLS freeze, BESSIE stumbles and utters a slow motion moan. The MAN runs, he bumps into someone coming down the street, regains his balance and flees. The GIRLS scream, faint, panic. The man bumped into turns out to be the OLD MAN narrator, he wanders downstage.)

OLD MAN

Bessie's number was four, and fours well ... they some tough people.

(BESSIE tries to chase her attacker but her legs go wobbly and she falls)

BESSIE

This thing pains me awful. Somebody pull it out please.

(One of the GIRLS pulls out the knife. BESSIE groans and rolls on her back, The REFEREE hits the bell . . .)

(BONG!!!)

OLD MAN

You step in the ring with a four you got trouble on your hands. They rebellious and they is fighters. NAW -pushovers they ain't ...

(Pause ... BESSIE grunts and sits up)

BESSIE

Umph ... take me home.

TOWN GIRL

You is home ... You been here half the night and all day the doctor say ...

BESSIE

... I gotta get to the show.

FIRST GIRL

Miss Bessie you can't do no show.

BESSIE

(struggling to her feet)

I ain't gonna miss it.

SECOND GIRL

You missed shows before.

BESSIE

Not sober I ain't.

(In another part of the stage)

MANAGER

Ladies and gentlemen, folks ... Miss Bessie has been taken ill ... uh, we must ... er will ... cheerfully refund your ...

(BESSIE appears)

BESSIE

Hold everything, just a goddamn minute Bessie is here!

(The manager embraces BESSIE with a big smile. Bessie moves through the arch representing the theatre and than)

Another area with another arch. A new situation. It's a confrontation.

OLD MAN

Bessie was Bessie loud and clear, anytime, anyplace, anywhere, and with anybody.

BESSIE

I ain't never heard of such shit.

TICKET MAN

I don't care if you the second coming. You can't come through here, this door ain't for colored use the back way.

BESSIE

I ain't gonne pick my way through that tunnel of garbage and rat shit for nobody.

TICKET MAN

Well, that's the way it is.

BESSIE

Well, just let me get my drops and we're on our way.

(manager coming up)

MANAGER

Don't be hasty, Miss Bessie.

BESSIE

It's your move.

(The REFEREE comes running up hoping for trouble but before he can get the boxing ring set up or even ring the bell the manager backs down)

MANAGER

All right, all right! I told that fool Rufus to clean out that alley, he's the laziest boy I ever seen.

OLD MAN

Why Bessie didn't even know the meaning of fear.

(A group of Klu Klux Klansmen start setting up a cross to burn; we strongly suspect that maybe the leading one is the REFEREE because he is carrying a starting bell in the crook of his arm. BESSIE watches them a minute with her hands on her hips)

BESSIE

What the hell is this?!

(The KKK stops, stunned, BESSIE kicks over the cross)

I ain't never seen such shit.

OLD MAN

I guess you could say Bessie and excitement was on more than speaking terms. In fact it seemed sometimes if trouble didn't come looking for she'd take off looking for him.

(AGIE, a dancer in the show, comes out of stage door, lights cigarette, lounges then turns his head and calls inside. Chorus girls begin to exit as he talks)

AGIE

Hey Bessie, shall I meet you after the show?

BESSIE

Naw, I'm talking some music business so I'll be late, don't wait.

AGIE

(to one of the GIRLS)

Hey, Cloris, c'mere a minute. Listen, I was just noticing tonight how you kinda bloomed the last week or so. You know?

CLORIS

Aw, hush, Agie, you full of applesauce.

AGIE

No, I'm serious. You looking good. I thought about you all during my dance specialty. Hey, you wanta have a little bite to eat?

CLORIS

Agie, you Bessie's man, and I ain't about to have my head whipped like Evelyn.

(starting off)

Self-preservation is the first law of nature.

(she exits)

(AGIE stands, looks interestedly at a couple of others but they laugh or put their hands up in a protest of "No indeed", or "Not me." Finally a TOWN GIRL passes, gazes impressed at the stage door and AGIE. HE cools it while she gets up her nerve)

TOWN GIRL

You Agie, ain't'cha?

AGIE

That's me.

TOWN GIRL

I seen you.

AGIE

You seen the show?

TOWN GIRL

Un huh. You were something.

(She does a giggling imitation of his breaks)

AGIE

(laughs)

Hey, you not bad. Listen, maybe if I work with you a little bit, I can show you a couple of things. You know what I mean?

TOWN GIRL

Ma? I'm just a small town girl, but I know what you mean, but ain't you Miss Bessie's friend?

AGIE

Naw, she's my guardian. She's kinda strict that's all ... by the time she changes out of her costume we'll be long gone.

(HE takes her arm, they start off, HIM chuckling. BESSIE obviously looking for Agie comes out of stage door, still in her Aunt Jemima costume complete with pillows stuffed in bosom and behind and carrying a broom. SHE spots AGIE and the TOWN GIRL)

BESSIE

You motherless bastard! I gotcha!

(AGIE caught like a rabbit in a spot-light, galvanized into action as BESSIE starts toward him with the broom. TOWN GIRL is left standing on the spot.)

TOWN GIRL

Miss Bessie Smith!

(BESSIE knocks her down with one blow, without even breaking stride. AGIE scurries around the corner.

BESSIE

Wait ti'l I get my hands on you, you snake ...

OLD MAN

No sirreee, Bessie wasn't no shrinking violet, she had a lot of living to do and she was cramming it in for all she was worth
(pause, sadly)

... Yeh, guess it was a lucky thing she did ...

BESSIE

(off stage)

You poor excuse of a two timing rat:

(Wham: Off stage the sound of a trash can hitting a head)

Act 2, Scene 2

(BLACKOUT)

In the dark, the tinkle of a spoon on a water glass. Light comes up to reveal a dinner table, around which sit the family, JACK GEE, LILLY, BESSIE'S BROTHER AND SISTERS, ETC`

CHARLIE

(rising)

All right, all right, if you all don't shut up and listen, I ain't gonna let you have no dessert.

(They laugh and ad lib, "Who'd have any room anyhow?" "You just try it"! "You be in deep trouble, boy!", etc`)

CHARLIE

Hush! Wait a minute now. Soon it'll be time to hit that old summer circuit. I know you all can hardly wait.

(Assorted groans and grunts)

Yeah, them good old accommodations.

GROUP

Good old Mice, Good old lice, Good old towels already used twice.

CHARLIE

(tapping on water glass)

It's gonna be a new day!

RUBY

What we gonna do, stay here and bring the folks to us?

VIOLA

You ain't never as comfortable away as you are at home, I reckon.

CHARLIE

(savoring the moment)

You got it. You heard of the turtle ... carries his house wherever he goes.

(BESSIE enters carrying something covered with a towel, she sets it on the table.)

CHARLIE

All right everybody, close your eyes!

JACK GEE

And watch your wallet!

CHARLIE

What anybody want with two Christmas cards and a Elks Membership?

(EVERYBODY laughs)

Come on close your eyes!

BESSIE

(removes towel)

Abracadabra ... OK!

(They open their eyes to exclamations at the model of a bright yellow railroad car. THEY applaud.)

BROTHER

That's for us?

SISTER

Now that's what I call First Class. Bessie, that's what you all is gonna travel in?

BESSIE

Let Charlie tell you ... He been like a kid with a new dog.

LILLY

Come on, Charlie stop teasing.

CLARENCE

Long as a house . . . hot water ... cold water, seven staterooms, the props and scenery goes back here. This is for the workmen, and when we on the move, the tent is in here. Oh, yeah ... we got our own tent. Now the sodas and the candies and the flags ...

(CHARLIE'S voice fades down to be superseded by that of the OLD MAN, NARRATOR dressed in an outfit that is a cross between a drum major and a pullmen porter)

OLD MAN

All in all their railroad car years was fat times.

(The railroad car comes in, it is cut away so we can see inside. Sometimes the wheel turns to represent travel. The numbers on the side announcing the year of the tour is changed from time to time ... BESSIE'S 1925 FROLICS)

OLD MAN

The car was something. It even had a kitchen.

(BESSIE's three sisters stand around watching BESSIE directing the loading of her railroad kitchen, workmen arranging things.)

1ST SISTER

(bitching)

Well I do hope she has a high old time.

2ND SISTER

Ain't it the truth. Don't worry about us back here with nothing to do.

3RD SISTER

We ain't famous child.

BESSIE

(noticing sisters)

Hey ain't this something ... come on. We gotta take a little walk. I know it ain't easy to get no good homecooked food up north here and since you all always saying about ... well here.

(BESSIE has moved to another area. A restaurant door, with a sign saying closed. She flips the sign to open)

BESSIE

... it's yours.

(The sisters start oohing and aahing and BESSIE goes back to her leading. JACK GEE enters with 3 women: a nurse, a girl and the girl's mother.)

JACK GEE

Bessie.

BESSIE

Yeah, honey bun.

JACK GEE

Come on down here.

(BESSIE dismounts)

JACK GEE

I got your heart's desire.

BESSIE

Whatcha mean my heart's desire?

JACK GEE

Whatcha always talking about, I got it honey, it's all arranged through these ladies here.

(JACK GEE steps aside, nurse moves forward holding out a baby.)

BABY

YAAAAAH!

(BESSIE is struck dumb. She takes the baby and begins to cry.)

OLD MAN

The car was a home and a hotel on wheels. When they'd hit a town, boy wasn't that something! The Theatre Owner and Bookers Association, that was the official title of the colored vaudeville circuit, the T'O'B'A' -as the entertainers called it, -tough on Black asses had seen some things in its day but nothing like Miss Bessie and her revue. Mmmmmmp ump.

(The wheels stop turning. BESSIE and her gang disengage from the railroad car do a parade to announce their arrival and do a rapid pantomime of putting up the tent, drawing a show, striking the tent, and getting back on the road, the wheels turning again, 1926. The sequence is done at a couple of more times with little variations. Once JACK goes off with a CHORUS GIRL while BESSIE is singing, once they have a picnic . . . 1927. BESSIE spends a lot of time playing with the baby)

OLD MAN

A new electric way of recording was discovered and records got better; and Bessie was selling more and more. There wasn't no miracles of nothing but things were pretty good. In the meantime

(BONG!!!)

They threw everything they could get their hands on at her from the KKK and sleazy managers to floods, to bad liquor . . . but she kept keeping on.

REFEREE

SHIT!

(BESSIE walks over to rehearse with her pianist)

OLD MAN

Vinegar didn't seem to do the trick so they tried honey.

BESSIE

Thanks for rehearsing me Porter. I'm gonna record that one and Leroy's drunk somewhere. If you ever need a favor just ask me . . . You're all right . . .

(laughing)

I don't care what anybody says.

(She claps him on the shoulder. He winces visibly . . .)

(The REFEREE hurries over to the pianist, gives him a palsy-walsy hug and whispers something in his ear.)

(BONG!!!)

PORTER

(weak smile)

Thank you Miss Bessie ... uh ... Actually I have a bit of a favor to ask of you, the Van Vechtens ...

BESSIE

What is that?

PORTER

They're a WHO ... er white friends ... They do admire your singing so much, they have all your records. They're having a party.

BESSIE

I ain't much for parties where they drink legal liquor and eat them little bitty sandwiches and shit.

(The lights begin to go down on PORTER and BESSIE)

PORTER

Just come and be yourself ... I'll bring gin for you myself.

(small smile)

It would mean so much to me.

(The lights come up in the party area. Mozart is playing in ragtime. BESSIE enters in a floor length ermine white coat, PORTER has on a tux, top hat and cane. A choreographed silent applause when PORTER enters with his prize. Gushings, cluckings, bright faces too close to BESSIE'S, champagne glasses given to her which she gives to PORTER, who exchanges each for a tumbler of gin ... Trips to the piano, pantomime a song, waves of congratulatees keep pressing in on BESSIE. She can hardly breathe. Another wave of gawkers and admirers presses forward)

BESSIE

Stand back you all.

MRS. VAN VECHTEN

Isn't she darling?

(Overcome with liberal love, Mrs' VAN VECHTEN throws her arms around BESSIE and kisses her on the mouth. BESSIE flattens her ... everybody freezes. BESSIE takes her coat and stomps into the night)

BESSIE

I ain't never heard of such shit!

(The lights dim on PORTER wringing his hands in shame and guests rushing to pick up a weakly smiling Mrs' VAN VECHTEN ... party swirls offstage. BESSIE marches to another area, her face changing from rage to indignation, to mischievous twinkle as she goes. Lights come up on BESSIE smiling and leaning on a bar talking to LILLY and some new found friends)

LILLY

You didn't!

BESSIE

Yes I did! ... Flat on her ass!

(All laugh uproarously)

BARTENDER

My round!

PATRON

Miss Bessie, you something!

BESSIE

Well, I ain't nobody but me.

LILLY

And that's enough!

PATRON

My round! When I drink, everybody drinks!

BESSIE

Yeah, and when you pay, everybody pays! My round! I feel good. I feel like singing.

ALL

Yeah,

Ray.

Sing, Miss Bessie!

Sing for me!

Sing the blues!

Yes lawd! etc ...

(BESSIE starts singing, LILLY joins her. THEY begin a Pied Piper march out of the bar, to sing and dance on the street, SHE and LILLY ending up haunch to haunch sitting on a garbage can, singing to a half high crowd ... Suddenly a roar is heard. It's JACK GEE shoving his way through)

JACK GEE

You ain't nothing but bitches!

(The women try to get it together)

I said you ain't nothing but bitches, bitches, bitches! You hear?!

BESSIE

I hear you Jack Gee.

(BESSIE tries to look contrite, but a giggle trickles out. That starts LILLY to laughing. The PATRONS, begin to laugh too. The laughter is humiliating to JACK, aggravating his paranoia, HE trembles with rage)

JACK GEE

Bitches, bitches, bitches, BITCHES, BITCHES, BITCHES! BIIIIIIITTTTTCCCCCHHHHHHEEESSSS!!

(JACK charges, he is so irate, he falls over the garbage cans still screaming he beats his fists into the pavement. PEOPLE try to calm HIM. Finally HE is subdued and dragged off kicking and screaming by men in white jackets. BESSIE has stayed. The light goes down on her standing, looking in the direction JACK has been taken away)

(BONG!!!)

(The light comes up on JACK GEE laying under a sheet in a sanitarium bed, the REFEREE dressed as a male nurse attends to him, there is a rose in the vase on the night table)

BESSIE

(at the door)

Jack ... Jack honey ...

(she comes in softly)

... how's your breakdown doing Jack honey.

(SHE can't see the REFEREE)

JACK GEE

All right I suppose.

BESSIE

You need anything?

JACK GEE

Naw ... I feel pretty good now ... just like to get to work ... I had a lot of time to think ... I wanta do something big, produce a show, you know, get one ready for you all by myself.

BESSIE

For me? Oh, that'd be wonderful, Jack Gee.

JACK GEE

Only thing is I can't swing it without no money ... And your relatives got the funds closed on me ...

BESSIE

Oh, that's all right, honey, how much you need?

JACK GEE

Oh, I don't know ... say three thousand.

BESSIE

Here! It's yours, honey, you know that.

(BESSIE takes a wad of money out of her purse and places it on the night table. She kisses JACK GEE and leaves. The REFEREE follows her to the door making obscene gestures. He rushes back to JACK GEE. He pulls off the covers. JACK GEE is fully dressed. The REFEREE helps him up and shoves the wad of money in his hand and escorts him out the door laughing. The REFEREE rings the bell)

(BONG! ! !)

(A man knocks on the door of BESSIE'S compartment in the railroad car. The train sign says 1928)

BESSIE

Yeah ... Is it time already, I'll be right there.

MAN

It's Travis, Miss Bessie. I got something important to show you.

BESSIE

(opening the door)

Travis, what the hell! I ain't never liked you and I ain't never hid it. What you want?

TRAVIS

(man)

I got something to show you, Miss Bessie. It's for you.

BESSIE

(Opening door to receive newspaper clipping from TRAVIS)

What's this now?

TRAVIS

You should read it, Miss Bessie, then you'll know who your friends are. Some wouldn't tell you, but I want you to know I'm your friend. Them people talking about what I said about you was lying, Miss Bessie.

(BESSIE has been reading)

It's about half way down the column, and I thought you should know about it. Some people wouldn't tell you ...

(BESSIE has stopped reading, stunned, hurt. Small smile from TRAVIS)

... You can't find it? Here, I'll show you ...

(Takes clipping from her numb fingers)

See? Right here. "J' G', promoter, promotes romance with G'S', but the bankroll is from B'S', and everybody knows B'S' don't play that b's' Watch out, J'G'!" See? J'G' -Jack Gee, G'S' -Gertrude Saunders, B'S' -that's you.

BESSIE

I saw it, Travis.

(SHE turns away, hiding tears. TRAVIS shows his malicious smile)

TRAVIS

Now you know who your friends are, Miss Bessie ...

BESSIE

Yeh

(TRAVIS smiles, exits)

Oh, God.

(SHE cries -not a little girl's wail, but a deep terrifying thing torn out of a woman, a bellows of pain SHE sings a song with no words only sobs of suffering. This time she is hurt in her innermost being. BESSIE stands up majestic in her rage)

BESSIE

Lilly! !

LILLY

What is it?

BESSIE

Let's go.

LILLY

Where?

BESSIE

Hunting!

(BESSIE spies JACK and GERTIE. She picks up a rock or board)

BESSIE

You motherless Bitch! You two-timing Bastard!

(BESSIE goes berserk, charging down on them. She twirls like a dervish beating them into the ground and gives a scream of triumphant revenge. She calms down facing the audience, chest heaving. LILLY tries to take her arm to lead her away but BESSIE shakes her off)

BESSIE

NEXT?! Come on. NEXT?!

(Pause ... BESSIE and LILLY start upstage toward the railroad car)

LILLY

Yaaaaahhhhh!

(A body falls out the sky almost hitting them. LILLY leaps aside, BESSIE doesn't even flinch. SHE mounts the steps of the railroad car and goes into her compartment, which can be seen clearly because of the cut away, and begins to cry)

Outside pandemonium is breaking loose as more bodies fall. Simultaneously; 1 2 3:

(1): A newsboy parades up and down.

NEWSBOY

Wall Street lays an egg. Read all about it! Wall Street lays an egg! Depression maybe.

(2): The platforms on each side of the stage become windows on Wall Street. Actors keep jumping out. The REFEREE runs around like a chicken with its head cut off trying to calm the panic. The stage looks like the finale of a tumbling act. Sometimes the REFEREE will try to catch a Wall Street broker and they tumble head over heels. A strobe light comes on intermittently each time giving an old newsreel effect.

REFEREE

KEEP CAIM! DON'T PANIC! AMERICA WILL PULL THROUGH! GOD IS ON OUR SIDE! etc'

(3): BARKER: Midstage a barker harangues a rapidly moving line ... He keeps changing his pitch, each time he holds up the appropriate sign.

BARKER

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen the Empress of the Blues. Excuse me. Take you soup and step to the side, no loitering, there are others to be fed. Didn't you guys hear what I said? There ain't no jobs today, NO JOBS! Be back tomorrow at eight. NO PUSHING! Sorry the bank is closed. Be calm, be calm, your deposits are absolutely safe. You ain't heard nothing folks till you hear BESSIE SMITH, THE QUEEN OF THE BLUES.

(The OLD MAN in a pair of dark glasses and cane, selling pencils, humming tunelessly and wearing a veteran's garrison cap, moves downstage. He takes a furtive look around, then removes the glasses and puts aside the pencils he's been hustling, shrugs disarmingly)

OLD MAN

Yeah, some of them big time economics games was turning sour ... The show went on as usual, for a while anyway ... Naw, not all the lines was standing out in front of the theatres where Bessie was playing. She'd taken every punch they could throw.

(Gradually the chaos begins to simmer down)

But them beatings was taking a toll, and what them hard knocks couldn't accomplish, time was doing, folk's taste was changing and Blue singers weren't no more the big thing.

(The crowds begin to thin out. Each actor carries off a piece of the railroad car as they leave the scene)

(In the meantime, inside the railroad car, BESSIE in a greasy robe putters around the kitchen talking to LILLY and a couple of friends ... A bottle passes around)

FIRST GIRL

Miss Bessie, how come you don't go abroad? Plain old blues don't get it no more.

BESSIE

What broad? I only take up with gentlemen and ladies.

(everybody laughs)

SECOND GIRL

Yeh,

(reading from paper)

how come you don't enter into the mainstream of America?

BESSIE

Hell, I'm my own mainstream.

(everybody laughs)

SECOND GIRL

Josephine Baker is the toast of Paris.

LILLY

They say Ethel Waters is the Darling of London.

BESSIE

Ethell Sweet Momma Stringbean? Well, what do you know.

FIRST GIRL

You gotta do something.

RUBY

How 'bout Broadway, they say Alberta Hunter and Paul Robeson setting the town on fire in Showboat.

BESSIE

Do tell. Naw, you all go on and enjoy yourselves. Naw, I'll just hang on in here cooking my greens.

(Everyone exits. BESSIE keeps on puttering. Except for her and the railroad car, which has been reduced to a skeleton, the stage is empty. A stage manager enters)

STAGE MANAGER

You're on Bessie.

BESSIE

I'm coming.

(The STAGE MANAGER exits. The REFEREE darts in and sets up the ring)

REFEREE

You're on Bessie.

(BESSIE turns and comes to the top of the train steps. She sees the ring)

(BONG!!!)

A calm of fatality comes over her. She holds out her hands and her second, the OLD MAN-NARRATOR, appears with a pair of boxing gloves and puts them on her. BESSIE steps into the ring. The REFEREE pantomimes announcing the fighters, however BESSIE's opponent is invisible. The OLD MAN takes her robe.

(She has on an old time fighter's costume. She takes a fighter's stance, still show bizness to her fingertips, she flashes a big smile)

(BONG!!!)

(BESSIE circles the empty ring, keeping her guard up. The OLD MAN moves downstage)

OLD MAN

The Black vaudeville circuit closed.

(BESSIE staggers from the unseen blow ... She recovers)

OLD MAN

Her recording contract was not renewed.

(BESSIE staggers again her knees go wobbly)

OLD MAN

Then they sent the family in.

(Screams -BESSIE'S sisters come charging into the ring like cattle. JACK GEE and FRANK RUNNER join the mob battling BESSIE. One sister even leaps on her back. BESSIE is overpowered)

OLD MAN

Jack Gee even stole the baby.

(BESSIE makes a superhuman lunge at JACK GEE as he exits the ring, but she is pulled back. BESSIE screams they pummel her. She screams again. They abandon BESSIE ... the last of the family files out of the ring. BESSIE slumps to the floor.

REFEREE

(starting to count her out)

1,2,3, . . .

(straightening up with a disdainful shrug)

Why bother . . . she's finished.

(starting to pack up)

No more comeback, no more Black inspiration, no more threat, no more Miss Bessie.

(turning to go)

Things are back where they should be.

(The stage is bare except for BESSIE and a fighter's stool. BESSIE crawls to the stool and tries to raise herself, she falls back, she tries and fails again . . . She manages finally to prop herself up with the aid of the stool)

(A tall figure wearing an overcoat with the collar turned up and a hat enters. He helps her sit on the stool, he produces her old robe and drapes it over her shoulders. He takes off his hat politely.)

RICHARD MORGAN

Put this around you, honeybun, before you catch cold.

BESSIE

(looking up, startled, pleased)

Richard!

RICHARD MORGAN

(reading her thoughts)

Why not. I heard the news, and I thought I'd come see about you. What else I got to do? ... Repeal hasn't hurt me none.

Being legit just gives me a little more time to do as I please.

(He opens his coat, brings out a bottle)

I got a little something for you ... no label ... just what you need. I told you I'd give it to you for free.

BESSIE

(smiling)

And I told you the same thing ...

(Their smiles grow to laughter, but BESSIE'S laughter turns to tears)

You get so tired sometimes, Richard

(BESSIE sings Lean On)

RICHARD MORGAN

(taking a swig, patting her tenderly awkwardly)

Don't I know.

BESSIE

(takes the bottle, a swig, looks at RICHARD, smiles bravely)

Come on, let's get this show on the road.

They begin a tour. At each stage the audience gets sleazier duller, the reverse of her rise ... Finally BESSIE is on the stage right platform.

(It's almost like long ago when she sang for pennies with her brother. Suddenly there is light on the platform stage left and a Black and a White boxer are there, the light goes back down)

(RICHARD is playing solitary. BESSIE steps in to the light)

RICHARD MORGAN

Well, how did the show go, OK?

BESSIE

Can a chicken play tuba? I could enjoy a drink.

RICHARD MORGAN

Coming up.

(Passes BESSIE bottle, BESSIE TAKES a swig, beat ...)

Don't be discouraged sweetheart.

BESSIE

I ain't never heard of such shit. Discouraged -why I'm just getting started -I give out sometimes, but I don't give up.

STAGE MANAGER

Bessie!

BESSIE

I'm coming ... I Richard how come you put up with me? The money I makes in these joints wouldn't keep a rat in cheese; a rat let alone no cat, I ain't no beauty queen.

RICHARD MORGAN

Ain't no putting up to it, bootlegging done made me independently wealthy and what do wealthy people do. They travel so I travel and you suit me.

BESSIE

(chuckling)

You call dragging around from one low-down juke-juke with me to another traveling?

RICHARD MORGAN

I ain't complaining.

BESSIE

Richard I ...

STAGE MANAGER

Bessiel

BESSIE

I'm coming.

RICHARD MORGAN

You go on out there and kill 'em honey ...

(calling after her)

... Yeh, you go on out there and kill 'em.

(He sits back down to his solitary game ... He picks up the half empty bottle and contemplates)

The real good stuff don't need a label. Quality that burns your soul can't be told on no label, not with all the fanciest colors in the world. Can't be told or sold.

(FADE OUT)

(BESSIE AND RICHARD, suitcases in hand pass some kids on a corner dancing and singing. One girl recognizes BESSIE)

TOWN GIRL

Miss Bessie! Miss Bessie, is that really you . . . I'm gonna catch your show.

BESSIE

Well we gonna have at least one person in the audience for a change.

TOWN GIRL

I'm gonna bring my boyfriend too.

BESSIE

Well that makes two.

TOWN GIRL

I'm gonna sing. One day I'm gonna be better'n you!

BESSIE

(The kindly Wyatt Earp with the punk kid gunslinger)

I ain't never heard of such shit. I tell you what, if you gonna act as bad as you say you are, you better learn to do it right. The only thing you doing right now is opening your mouths, after that it's all downhill.

KID

Well, we learning. You had to learn, didn't you?

BESSIE

I had a better teacher.

KID

Who?

BESSIE

Me.

KIDS

Will you teach us? Help us out, Miss Bessie. Please! Pretty please!

BESSIE

Well, maybe.

KIDS

When, when?

BESSIE

(finally laughing)

All right, come on back after the show.

(BESSIE and RICHARD exit. The kids do an updated BESSIE routine)

(RICHARD is playing cards on the bed. BESSIE enters the light)

RICHARD MORGAN

Snookums how did it go? Where you been?

BESSIE

Them kids, Richard, them kids taught me something tonight.

RICHARD MORGAN

Yeah?

BESSIE

(holding back a sob, a little on the maudlin side)

Oh Richard I miss my baby so.

RICHARD MORGAN

(cheering her up)

Sure sure honey I know . . . come on that's better. What the kids show ya.

BESSIE

(getting hold of herself)

I show one of them something and they do it . . . but still it's different somehow. I'm gonna do just like them.

(warming to the idea)

Yes, this old dog is gonna do it. New tricks here I come!

RICHARD MORGAN

(puzzled, but liking her enthusiasm)

You ain't no old dog yet, but what new tricks?

BESSIE

I'm gonna do something ain't never been done!

(laughs, goes into RICHARD'S pocket for his bottle)

RICHARD MORGAN

What's that honey?

BESSIE

Stay the same and change too!

BESSIE and RICHARD back on tour . . . the chorus of a "new swing" song. It will start out with the kind of orchestration heard before, but Bessie will call out orders to change the beat, the rhythm, the instrumentation, etc', so that by the end of the song, we have a mid-thirties modern feeling. The audience grows bigger and bigger, and the interspersed announcements of her name (as in ... proud to present Miss Bessie!) get warmer and better received.

(During the last note of the song a MESSENGER runs through the audience (on a bike, if possible), delivers a telegram to RICHARD, who reads it during the last applause and lets out a great YELL! ! ! BESSIE and ALL turn to HIM)

RICHARD MORGAN

The Apollo wants you to come in there with your own review!

(ALL yell and dance triumphantly)

(RICHARD gets on pay phone, as does BESSIE. Sound a mishmash of nickels dropping in)

RICHARD AND BESSIE

Apollo!

GIRL OR MUSICIAN

Apollo

RICHARD AND BESSIE

Apollo!

GIRL OR MUSICIAN

Great!

RICHARD AND BESSIE

Apollo!

GIRL OR MUSICIAN

Gotcha!

(BLACKOUT ... pause)

ANNOUNCER

Jack Kretcher, ladies and gentlemen ... and in this corner, a a boy who is a credit to his race, in his first bout since turning pro ...

(The light comes up on the left platform, an announcer and two fighters are in the ring)

Joe Louis.

(BONG!!!)

(They shake hands, Joe quickly annihilates his opponent and the referee starts to count)

REFEREE

One ... Two ...

(Black out on the platform and lights up on the main stage. BESSIE is going over the dance routine with the chorus)

BESSIE

One Two, One Two ...

(The MANAGER charges in with a girl who has just flunked her audition)

MANAGER

No! No! No! I won't have it! We've built our whole reputation on our lovelies!

(He storms up to BESSIE)

Explain me this.

BESSIE

What.

MANAGER

She says you wouldn't hire her ... Just look at some of these other girls compared to her.

BESSIE

She can't dance.

MANAGER

But ... But ...

BESSIE

You mean she's lighter.

MANAGER

This is your comeback chance. What do you ...

TOWN GIRL

(fat mouthing)

... A decent looking girl can't get a job around Bessie, you gotta be a baboon.

(BESSIE knocks the GIRL on her ass with one punch)

OLD MAN

(Trucking and chuckling)

Time hadn't mellowed her none ...

BESSIE

(to MANAGER)

What was you saying about Comeback.

MANAGER

Naw, I said I guess I'll be getting back up front ... er ... carry on!

BESSIE

(turning to girls)

All right Baboons, let's move them asses, cause they sure enough on the line.

(Hard rehearsal ensues. It starts turning into the show with the chorus line single file "trucking" up to the stage (backs to the audience) -liberty belle setup)

(BLACKOUT)

Act 2, Scene 3

(The light comes up on the left platform, the boxing ring again with fighters and a RADIO ANNOUNCER, and at the foot of the platform a group of colored folks are gathered around a table with one of those old dome-shaped radios sitting on it)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

... the former heavyweight champion of the world Max Schmelling and in this corner undefeated in his professional career, Joe Louis!

REFEREE

Shit!

COLORED FOLKS

(fervently)

Please Joe — Go on boy get 'em.

OLD MAN

Some folks was getting excited about a new colored boy coming up . . . nicknamed him the brown Bomber and everything. .
.

REFEREE

Excited, huh? They'd worship him if they had the chance. Ha, Ha . . . If. . . Championships aren't horseshoes . . almost doesn't count.

OLD MAN

Some folks was catching on too about a colored man never getting a shot at the title and there was talk starting about it not being sporting no colored boy never...

REFEREE

(interrupting)

Listen you . . .

RADIO ANNOUNCER

(interrupting)

. . . Louis is in trouble!

COLORED FOLKS

(despondently)

Ooh, Jesus!

RADIO ANNOUNCER

. . . A fantastic straight right hand from Schmelling has put the Bomber on the canvas . . .

COLORED FOLKS

(groaning)

OH GOD, OH GOD, OH GOD.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

6 . . . 7 . . . 8 . . . 9 . . . 10 the brown bomber has been stopped. Knocked out in the twelfth round . . .

(The REFEREE dashes into the ring and raises Schmelling's arm in victory)

REFEREE

YAHOOO!!!

(The light goes off on the platform)

OLD MAN

The talk was, Joe couldn't take a punch and that he was a flash in the pan.

REFEREE

(climbing from ring)

I knew it, the guy's got a glass chin.

(getting an idea)

Say! . . .

(snapping his fingers)

. . . about that colored challenger . . .

AUDIENCE

More! — Encore! — Bravo! Applause!

(The light comes up on the main stage . . . BESSIE is bowing, her back is to the real audience)

REFEREE

What's that? . . . I haven't heard anything like that since Jack Johnson was winning . . . Or Bessie singing.

(BESSIE hits the last note of her song)

REFEREE

BESSIE SINGING!!!

(The REFEREE rushes to the Apollo,, BESSIE and the entire Revue are just finishing the encore. The beaming manager is presenting BESSIE with a bouquet of flowers. The lights dim and the REFEREE runs into a downstage spot)

REFEREE

(astounded)

What's this? Where'd she get the strength
She was finished, through . . .

(shaken)

She'll be bigger than ever, I tell ya.
There'll be no stopping her now.
Perhaps her gaze is locked on some distant star,
Some remote unperceived force of nature.

(regaining composure)

Macht nichts, the philosophy!
Destiny is infallible.
Even if we're shortsighted
We are surely part of a farsighted plan
And there's one chain that no one can break,
There's one solution that's final.

(BLACKOUT)

(A flash of light stage left then the light rises, a journalist is taking BESSIE's photo. Applause offstage . . . BESSIE signals she is tired . . . Richard moves the photographer off. The REFEREE studies BESSIE)

RICHARD MORGAN

(coming up to BESSIE)

You wowed 'em.

BESSIE

I'm through.

RICHARD MORGAN

Yeh, you had a hard day.

BESSIE

That's not what I mean . . . I feel like I'm on the wrong end of a telescope . . . I feel them ole mule straps pulling at me.

RICHARD MORGAN

You got an offer to make records again . . . even Hollywood been calling . . . that doesn't sound like the wrong end of anything to me.

BESSIE

You ever think about what you wanta be buried in?

RICHARD MORGAN

Look, honey, I got us a nice room, we get you a good sleep, tomorrow we play over in Darling, Mississippi. That ain't far away we'll drive over real leisurely in the afternoon, whata you say.

OLD MAN

1937 . . .

BESSIE

I want to go tonight.

OLD MAN

Yeh! 1937 and finally a colored man was getting a chance at the title.

REFEREE

(sweetly)

One must obey, not hinder, the will of the people.

(chuckles)

. . . they wanted a colored contender . . .

RICHARD MORGAN

Honey, I'm a little tired for driving tonight.

(BONG! ! !)

(Underneath the muted voice of the RADIO ANNOUNCER is heard announcing combatants. It's the James J` Braddock versus Joe Louis fight.

BESSIE

(hard)

I ain't staying!

(softening tone)

It's time for me to go, Richard.

RICHARD MORGAN

Honey, let's just spend th . . .

BESSIE

. . . I ain't never heard of such shit. I'll get somebody else to drive me if you won't go.

REFEREE

I'm sticking with her to the end

(BONG ! ! !)

REFEREE

(nodding towards ring)

Braddock'll take care of ole tender chin...

RICHARD MORGAN

(giving in)

O`K` I'll go.

(A wild cheer . . . the lights come up on the stage left. On the platform the bout has started and below colored folks are huddling around the radio in the bar, pulling for Joe.)

(A country road. The REFEREE enters with a truck and parks it on the road. He rubs his hands in anticipation. He is so absorbed he pays no attention to the fight.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Braddock is down!

(LOUIS goes to a neutral corner, impassive. The FIGHT CROWD grows more tense, excited, a roar begins to form)

REFEREE

(nervous)

What's that? . . .

(Suddenly headlights appear)

REFEREE

Oh, their motor . . . Here they come!

(BESSIE AND RICHARD drive in. Car sounds swell up to match the building intensity of the RADIO ANNOUNCER's blow-by-blow)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

One! . . . Two! . . .

(The OLD MAN enters; he seems to be the only person aware of both events)

(The BAR CROWD keeps growing, it becomes a fight crowd too, with some folks listening to the radio and some looking up at the ring on the platform.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Three! . . . Four! . . .

(Braddock hasn't moved)

(The BAR-FIGHT-CROWD-BLACKS are almost in heaven, it's almost the second coming, Abe Lincoln and FDR rolled into one . . . almost, not-quiet-yet, the car with BESSIE and RICHARD draws closer, the REFEREE, completely engrossed, stands on the road smiling waiting.)

RADIO ANNOUNCER

Five! Six! Braddock is turning over!

REFEREE

Here she comes . . .

RADIO ANNOUNCER

His eyes are glazed, folks! His eyes are glazed! He's hurt and hurt bad! Seven!

(The noise — from the REFEREE, who begins to countdown, miggles with the RADIO ANNOUNCER, and the FIGHT-CROWD and the AUTOMOBILE — it builds and builds)

(simultaneously)

ANNOUNCERREFEREEEight!Three!Nine!Two!TEN!ONE!

(At TENONE the fight crowd explodes and the auto crashes into the truck)

(The REFEREE and the OLD MAN watch as pallbearers lift BESSIE's body)

(JOE on the shoulders of his joyous fans sweeps down the steps and onto the stage)

(Suddenly the REFEREE realizes what has transpired at the boxing match. Just then as BESSIE's funeral starts upstage, the OLD MAN takes a feather from BESSIE's boa)

(When JOE rides past the OLD MAN passes on the feather and gives him a pat on the back. Everyone exits except the OLD MAN)

OLD MAN

(funky)

Infallible, unchangeable book of destiny, my ass'

END